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**Margins Of Development, Social Justice, And  
Rural Poverty In Western Odisha****Nirad Kumar Pradhan****M.A, MPHIL, NET****Belpahar Degree College, Jharsuguda****Abstract:**

This work does not miss the issues of underdevelopment, social inequality, and rural poverty related to Western Odisha, one of the most backward regions in India. Western Odisha is rich in natural resources and has a vibrant culture; however, decimal poverty, high unemployment, poor healthcare, weak educational systems, and inadequate infrastructure are socio-economic problems that the region faces. The fact that a large segment of the population is tribal complicates matters further, since these communities often face systematic discrimination, dispossession, and displacement due to extractive development models.

Using their empirical data and literature, this paper addresses the fundamental aspects of social and economic neglect in relation to rural employment. It critically examines the role of the state, the adequacy of social security frameworks, and other social governance systems at the subnational level. Drawing on macro policy paradigms like seasonal migration and rights apathy—meaning nominal rights like MGNREGA and FRA—and micro policy frameworks such as gendered exclusion, the paper shows how these dynamics work towards ensuring that development is an unending process that evades the marginalized.

The study highlights the shift needed towards community-based, equitable, and participatory planning. It seeks to add to the larger conversation regarding imbalance development in India by positioning Western Odisha as a typical example of the rural poverty perpetuated by socio-political marginalization neglect and weak socio-political institutional frameworks. In essence, the study proposes reconceptualizing development to focus on honouring human dignity, governance through active citizen engagement, and just allocation of resources.

**Key words:** Western odsha, poverty, development, planning, socio-economic, unemployment

**1. Introduction**

Western Odisha, which includes Kalahandi, Nuapada, Bolangir and Bargarh districts as well as parts of Sundargarh and Sambalpur, is one of the least developed and growth deprived areas in India. Even though the region has an abundance of forests, minerals, and water bodies, it continues to suffer from low chronic socio economic indicators, poverty, underemployment, and consistent out-migration rates. It is rich in biodiversity and resources but suffers from socio-economically low-standard indicators due to chronic poverty and underemployment, recurring out-migration patterns, and inadequate infrastructure. Developmental underpinnings of the region can be traced back to the British colonial period, where Odisha was predominantly viewed as a resource extract zone, rather than a site for infrastructural and social investment. Life post-independence was not much better due to a lack of central and state policy interest, which focused more on urban dominated coastal Odisha due to its port and infrastructural connections. The

contemporary remnant of this problem is witnessed through low-human development indices sponsored by human development index which are unsupported by fragile health systems, a lack of quality education.

Across Western Odisha, many areas still lack even the most basic of school facilities, including amenities such as basic hygiene which affect both teacher and student attendance. Female literacy levels trail behind both state and national averages, and the alarming dropout rates for Tribal and SC communities are concerning, with Health outcomes exhibiting even further gaps. Factors such as underdeveloped health infrastructure, trained professionals, and tough geographical terrain lead to the widespread issues of maternal and infant mortality, malnutrition, and other preventable diseases.

Agriculture serves as the economic base for this area; however practices are yet to remain unmechanized with a strong dependence on erratic rainfall precisely signalling the need for development to mitigate climate change threats. The dependency on monsoons leads to unstable living conditions, with a lack of institutional credit and services needed for marked growth needed being stunted to submerge funding driving a large portion of the population to seek seasonal work elsewhere. Migration is no longer just a means of financial survival; it has become a way of life.

Compounding these problems is the sparse presence of industries and working opportunities. Even in some places where industries have advanced, they have not been able to captivate the local workforce or aid in local development, most often resulting in displacement and deeper marginalization. This type of development in which natural resources are removed without adequate local reinvestment is called extractive development and this has deepened existing inequalities.

This area suffers from a lack of action from administrative bodies as well as participatory governance. Local governance institutions such as Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRI) have inadequate funding and lack administrative freedom. Because of this, the planning and implementation of welfare programs is managed with rampant incompetence, corruption, misallocation, and poor targeting. While programs such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), Public Distribution System (PDS), and the Forest Rights Act (FRA) provide opportunities, these are reduced and confined to borders of corruption, weak monitoring frameworks, and lack of awareness from potential users.

In Western Odisha, social justice relates to issues broader than income or wealth inequality, such as political empowerment, cultural dignity, and ecological rights. Tribal populations have a customary attachment to land and forests, but they are often cut off from formal legal governance systems. Structural sociological frameworks do not recognize their prerogatives, which are usually developmentally detrimental to their eviction and dispossession. Voices of marginalized women are muted twice, in the realm of public policy and within the community.

This study intends to critically evaluate the entire region of Western Odisha and attempt to address the socially constructive issues of malign development imbalance through the lens of social justice, understanding rural poverty's root causes in the region. It aims to reveal state policies alongside social policies and community-level responses in order to capture the multifaceted approaches and present them in a way that leads to further efficacious development. There is no doubt that community-controlled, region-focused relief efforts to enable structural transformation must respond to development—this is needed from an ethical standpoint as well as for sustainable national advancement.

## 2. Research Problems

This study attempts to solve the following primary research problems:

1. Why Western Odisha continues to lag behind in socio-economic development vis-a-vis Other Backward regions, even after hosting state and a plethora of policy interventions and welfare measures?
2. What is the nature of historical, systemic, and institutional frameworks governing the rural poverty of this area?
3. How do caste, tribe, and class system impact access to resources, services, and opportunities?
4. What is the role and impact of various central and state government initiatives like MGNREGA, PDS, and FRA in poverty alleviation and how effective have they been?

## 3. Significance of the Study

The significance of the study is that it can bring attention to a relatively unknown area within the Indian landscape of development. It sheds light on:

- The combination of inequality and social exclusion.
- The absence of development policies tailored to specific regions or communities.
- The harsh socio-economic conditions of rural STs (Scheduled Tribes) and SCs (Scheduled Castes) who are largely absent from development processes narrates.
- The extent of the imbalances in the governance and the deeply rooted structures and processes that fail equitable growth.

By bringing these things to focus, the study aims to address gaps in scholarly work as well as the policies pertaining to sustainable and inclusive development.

## 4. Review of Literature

Without doubt, a thorough review of literature is essential to provide focus on the aspects of development, social justice, and rural poverty in Western Odisha. These issues have been studied from both national and regional perspectives and deserve attention. All the studies contribute to understanding the intricacies of rural underdevelopment and social exclusion in tandem.

In “An Uncertain Glory: India and its Contradictions” Amartya Sen and Jean Dreze (2013) highlighted the disparities in development within Indian states. Public action is necessary to alleviate social deprivations, and it was emphasized by them as lacking in Odisha. They describe as unable to realize their growth potential, economically progressive regions like Odisha which have poor health, education, and governance systems as infrastructure. Their rationale of capability deprivation fits best to Western Odisha where a cherished basic freedom like education and health care remains unattainable for vast numbers.

As J.K. Nayak (2019) observed in his analysis of governance and development in Odisha, local governance as well as planning development initiatives at the grassroots level is ineffective and lacks a bottom-up participative approach to development. Nayak points out that the Panchayati Raj Institutions are more or less perpetual servants to central government schemes and do not function as local autonomous bodies tailored for local services. These institutions have been dealing with a top-down system of granting

Binayak Sen (2005) did breakthrough work that focuses on the economic and socially underdeveloped areas which is referred to as rural poverty in more modern terms. His findings did not fail to astonish me due to how relevant they are today regarding land apartheid, bleak political capital and access, lag services of providing aid, as well as deepening impoverishment. This resonates with the case in Western Odisha, as tribal people frequently do not possess legal title to land even though they inhabit the forest for generations.

Meher (2001) concentrates exclusively on the brutality related to the violent removal of indigenous peoples from their land and construction. He researched the consequences resulting from the construction of large scale infrastructure facilities and mining activities on the indigenous population. His approach regarding the adverse consequences of uprooting without appropriate rehabilitation as socially, economically intensifying poverty while severing an identity makes his study notable. This is particularly intense in areas dominated by mining and dam construction activities in western Odisha. The Reports from the World Bank regarding Odisha's Poverty and Healthcare and their monitoring of fundamental human rights.

A Saxena study for the Planning Commission in 2010 focused on the implementation gaps in major welfare schemes such as MGNREGA, PDS, and FRA. He pointed out issues such as administrative corruption, inefficiency, service delivery accountability, and erosion of responsibility chains, especially in far-flung areas. That was one of the findings of the research, while other focus was on the lack of community involvement and need for greater openness.

Pradhan and Das, 2015 mapped out the region's Western Odisha's seasonal migration and attributed that to rural distress, particularly agrarian distress. Notably, their research correspondence to several families migrating to brick kilns and constructions sites in Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, and Chhattisgarh, often in exploitative conditions. Their position is that migration is not solely an economic pursuit, but rather a manifestation of deeper systemic failure.

Also the Human Development Reports of Odisha 2004 and 2011 contain detailed discussion on development indicators at district and even block levels. These reports are said to have achieved quite a lot in promoting and shaping regional development policy but certainly underline the glaring gaps in implementation and monitoring.

Despite the above paradigms, there is an infrequent but integrated research attempt that focuses on rural poverty, social justice, and the deep-rooted features of underdevelopment in Western Odisha. While myriad studies have looked into any aspect such as migration, health, governance, or even displacement, scant attempts have been made to explore poverty from a holistic socio-political and historical lens. This study aims to bridge that gap by integrating available literature and conducting fieldwork to provide an interdisciplinary approach to the understanding of the peripheries of development in Western Odisha.

On the other hand, social justice domains of studying poverty at grassroots levels of regional underdevelopment are hardly employed in unison. There is very little literature on this.

## 5. Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are:

1. Examine the level and approach of rural poverty in Western Odisha.
2. Assess the accessibility and effectiveness of public welfare schemes such as MGNREGA, Public Distribution System (PDS), and Forest Rights Act (FRA).
3. Assess the role of caste, tribe, and class in mediating development and access to services.
4. Formulate policies geared toward inclusive development and equitable resource allocation.



## 6. Hypotheses

This study is based on the following hypotheses:

- It is likely that government intervention policies are ineffectual due to systemic and governance constraints.
- It is likely that Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes of this region face an inadequately low share of public services and developmental programs.
- Distress or seasonal migration is largely due to the agrarian crisis or insufficient employment options within the region.

## 7. Methodology

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods provides the baseline for this research methodology.

- Study Area: Kalahandi, Nuapada, and Bolangir districts will be the focus of the study as these areas demonstrate high levels of rural poverty and out-migration.
- Sample Size and Sampling: To ensure a fair representation from different caste, tribal, gender, and economic categories, 300 households will be selected through stratified random sampling.
- Data Collection Techniques:

Primary Data: Includes community and local leader (government officials and NGOs) surveys along with structured interviews and focus group discussions.

Secondary Data: Includes District Census (2011), NSSO rounds, Human Development Reports and various policy documents of the government.

- Data Analysis: Statistical analysis of quantitative data will be conducted using SPSS software, while qualitative data will undergo narrative and community perspective analysis to thematically extract major viewpoints.

## 8. Rationale of the Study

The socio-economic development issues related to Western Odisha continue to be one of the reasons for despair in the region. Although there are many government schemes, the area is still grappling with poverty, marginalization, and underdevelopment. There is a need to appreciate the profound underlying causes and structural constraints which lie behind the lack of effective development. Inaccessibility to justice and resources regarding employment opportunities for the rural and tribal population need to be addressed. There is a need for development that is inclusive and equitable in approach. This is achievable through solutions that are relevant to the conditions on the ground. This is what the study attempts to advocate for.

## 9. Delimitations of the Study

- This study focuses on only three districts which will not consider the entire variation in Western Odisha.
- The Emphasis is on the rural and tribal people, neglecting urban poverty and industrial wage earning.
- The breadth and length of the fieldwork is limited due to constraints of resources and time.
- Some secondary data might be lacking recency and granularity.

## 10. Policy Recommendations

The following are policy-level interventions for addressing chronic rural poverty, systemic marginalization and governance failure in Western Odisha:

### Strengthening Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs):

Capacity-building interventions for financial independence, decentralized planning and participatory budgeting must be made available to PRIs. PRIs must be given the autonomy and responsibility to plan and implement welfare schemes that respond to local needs instead of simply implementation centrally-decided schemes.

### Decentralized and Contextual Welfare Planning:

Welfare programme must also consider the region's socio-cultural diversity, appropriate tribal customs, geographic constraints, etc. Regional Planning Boards should be formed with representatives from tribal communities, women, and local civil society organizations (CSOs).

### Community-Based Forest and Land Governance:

The implementation of the Forest Rights Act (FRA) must be strengthened through community forest rights (CFR) and ultimately empowerment. Support forest dwellers to manage and derive sustainable livelihoods from forest resources through cooperatives and eco-tourism.

### Increasing Transparency of Welfare Schemes:

Digitized public dashboards, with real-time data on employment days, ration distribution, and land titles, can improve transparency and underside accountability in MGNREGA, PDS, and FRA. The institutionalization of independent social audits and community monitoring should also be a key result area.

### Gender-Responsive Development Programs:

Establish schemes that change the lives of tribal and dalit women, especially those experiencing displacement or migration, through skill-building, micro-credit, and education grants. Increase women's representation in local governance.

## 11. Directions for Future Research

There are multiple possibilities for future research:

### Urban-Rural Linkages and Remittances:

While migration may be the only means of survival, future research could examine long-term remittance effects on rural households' education, health, and land investments.

### Digital Divide and Governance Delivery:

As data shows an increasing digitalization of welfare delivery (i.e., DBT, e-health), further research is necessary to analyze the barriers tribal populations face when seeking access to online services and entitlements.

### Post-COVID Development Shifts:

The pandemic demonstrated the fragility of rural health and employment systems. Future research could analyze post-COVID policy responses related to how they influenced social protection programs, development programming, migration pathways, and public health outcomes in Western Odisha.

## 12. Conclusion

The developmental problems in Western Odisha reflect India's broader challenges with equitable and inclusive growth. Despite its abundant natural and cultural resources, the region continues to be afflicted by chronic poverty, structural marginalization, poor infrastructure, and institutional apathy. The study demonstrates how historical injustices, centralized planning, exploitative development, and the marginalization of Scheduled Tribes and Castes, have critically limited socio-economic opportunity and access to development in the region.

The detailed critical evaluation of welfare schemes in the region (MGNREGA, PDS, and FRA) reveal these schemes have the potential to be transformative but at ground-level, transformational potential is being undermined by the pervasive problem of weak implementation, corruption, and a lack of participatory governance. Critically, the study demonstrates the complexity of intersection of caste, tribe, gender and geography in exacerbating inequalities and the need and urgency for localized and place-based approaches to development.

Moving forward, the development process must be rooted in social justice which emphasizes agency of community, ecological sustainability, and redistributive justice. Development must be re-imagined not simply as economic growth and productivity but within the framework of augmenting human capability, reconstituting local cultural identities, and enabling relations of organic democracy from below. Only then can Western Odisha be acknowledged as part of India's development story rather than marginalized to the periphery.

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